

Merritt A. Violette House
State Route 107
Florida
Monroe County
Missouri

HABS No. MO-1205

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69-FLOR,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20243

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. MO-1205

MERRITT A. VIOLETTE HOUSE

Location: 0.3 mile north of the intersection of State Route 107 and County Route U, at the northern edge of the town of Florida, Monroe County, Missouri.

USGS Florida 7 1/2' Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 15.604390.4372410.

Present Owner: United States of America, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, St. Louis District (August 1978).

Present Use: Vacant. Located in the Clarence Cannon Dam and Reservoir Project Area.

Significance: The Merritt A. Violette House is a particularly refined example of the late Victorian, Colonial Revival small frame house. Its plan, elevations, roofscape, and interior detailing all show a sophistication in design that may indicate the influence of a pattern book or an architect from outside the area.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1902-03.
2. Architect/builder: Mrs. Annie Violette, Merritt Violette's wife, is said to have designed the house from what architectural design experience she had acquired during her education as an art teacher at Howard Payne College, Brownwood, Texas. Her design was probably derived from one of the many pattern books published during the 1890s. John Jones and John Hensey were the builders. The house is reported to have cost \$6000.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The Merritt A. Violette House is located in the northwest quarter of the northwest quarter of Section 3, Township 54 North, Range 8 West. The following references are from the Office of the Recorder of Deeds, Monroe County Courthouse, Paris, Missouri:

- 1901 Warranty Deed, October 15, 1901. Recorded in Book 52, page 189. A.J. Utterback to M.A. Violette. 150 acres for \$3400.
- 1931 Inheritance. The house and land passed to Dan Violette, Merritt's only son, and his wife, Annie Violette, on the death of Merritt Violette.
- 1957 Will. September 9, 1957. Recorded in the Final Settlement Book 1, page 53. Dan P. Violette, deceased, to Ruth Richart.
- 1973 Executor's Deed, March 30, 1973. Recorded in Book 162, page 446. Robert Chowning Richart and Robert C. Richart, executors of the Ruth Richart estate, to the United States of America. Unknown acreage for \$136,500.
4. Original construction: The Violette House had had few changes since its construction and stands today essentially as it did originally. Entering from the west, the front, one passes through a vestibule into the hall, 18' high, with a decorative mantel and fireplace on the east end. At the front of the house, on either side of the vestibule/hall, are two bedrooms. The central rooms, opening on either side of the hall, are a parlor on the south and a dining room on the north. Behind (east) of the parlor is a library, and behind the dining room is the kitchen. Directly behind the hall, between the library and the kitchen, is a smoking room, to which the men would retire after dinner.
5. Alterations and additions: No additions have been made to the main structural unit of the house. the only significant change has been the creation of a bathroom between the parlor and library. The smoking room was altered when an arched door was cut on its north wall. Originally there were three double fireplaces, but the removal of those in the bedrooms left only the fireplaces between the hall and the smoking room.

Other minor changes include replacement front and rear porch floorboards, the covering of the original wood shingles with asphalt shingles and the laying of concrete walks.

B. Historic Persons and Events Associated with the House:

M.A. Violette, Sr., emigrated from Alsace-Lorraine to Kentucky, arriving in Missouri around 1838. By 1849 Violette and his wife had settled in the small town of Florida. Merritt A. Violette, Jr., was born there. He grew up in the town, becoming, at fourteen, a pony express rider between Florida and Paris during the Civil War. At the

age of fifteen he went to work as a clerk in dry good stores in Mexico and Sturgeon, small towns in adjacent counties. Merritt Violette and Annie Root were married in 1879, living in Sturgeon before moving to Linn, Missouri in 1894. Violette had the job of supplying ties to railroads until he was advised to find less strenuous work. In 1901 they moved to Florida, where Violette's mother still lived. After purchasing additional land in and around the town, the Violettes started construction of a house in 1902 on a ridge overlooking the Salt River Valley.

In addition to farming his land, Merritt A. "Dad" Violette (one of the first in the area to raise hybrid corn and Black Angus cattle) ran a general store with his son Dan and a partner. Later the store was operated by father and son and later still by the son only.

When Albert Bigelow Paine came to Florida in 1907 to locate the birthplace cabin of Mark Twain, Violette became interested in the biographer's research. The cabin identified was then being used as a shed for fodder and had fallen into disrepair. In 1915 "Dad" Violette began a serious effort to preserve and restore the structure, which he eventually bought and moved. His other interest was the construction and maintenance of camping shelters and sites near Florida on the Salt River. The informal outings to "Dad"'s campsites became annual events for many, especially the Camp Fire Girls, and hundreds came to see the Mark Twain cabin. In 1924, after numerous promotional campaigns, the Mark Twain Memorial Park was dedicated, in large measure as a result of the effort of "Dad" Violette. In the following year "Dad" managed to secure the perpetual preservation of the cabin, which he gave to the state. The cabin was moved off of "Dad"'s land in 1929 to a site in the Park and sheltered from the weather. "Dad" Violette was also active in the campaign to have a paved road constructed to Florida--a project that was completed just before his death in 1931. The esteem for Merritt A. "Dad" Violette throughout the area was shown by the presence of over one thousand persons at his funeral. The reception was held in the hall of the Violette house.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: None located.
2. Bibliography:

a. Primary sources:

Hunt, Karen (Platz) and Michael J. O'Brien, "National Register Nomination Form: Merritt "Dad" Violette House." Nomination prepared in conjunction with Historic Resource Survey, University of Nebraska, Cannon Human Ecology Project, 1977.

Hunt, Karen (Platz). "Historic Resources Survey Report."
University of Nebraska, Cannon Reservoir Human Ecology
Project, 1977.

Letter, September 26, 1919. Files, Mark Twain Shrine,
Florida, Missouri.

"U.S. Census of Monroe County, Missouri, 1850."
Dulaney Memorial Library, Paris, Missouri.

b. Secondary sources:

Gregory, Ralph. M.A. "Dad" Violette: A Life Sketch
(Florida, Missouri: Privately printed 1969).

- c. Likely sources not investigated: No source for the design of the house has been found in any of the pattern books available in the Library of Congress. Pattern books published as early as five to ten years before the house was built could have influenced the design. Pattern books published as late as five to ten years after could have shown the Violette house as an example of an executed design.

Prepared by: Travis C. McDonald
Architectural Historian
Historic American
Buildings Survey
August 1978

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Merrit A. Violette House is a story-and-a-half frame structure, possessing features which are both common among contemporary houses in the area and unusual in their degree of originality and refinement.
2. Condition of fabric: Good. The building has had fairly steady maintenance throughout its lifetime.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: 48'9" (three-bay front) by 41'6". The house has one usable story, with a central hall 18' high extending into the attic area.

2. Foundations: Limestone blocks set in rough courses with lime-base mortar in continuous perimeter walls. Intermediate piers run east-west beneath the interior bearing walls (the north and south walls of the center hall). A small crawl space vent is located on the north foundation wall, at the northeast corner.
3. Walls: The exterior walls of the house are divided horizontally by projecting or flush boards which maintain the same level on all sides, unifying the elevations and emphasizing the horizontal appearance of the house. The lowest panel, immediately above the stone foundation walls, is a fascia panel, a plain board which covers the building sill. Above this is a sloped wood watertable. Above the watertable is a panel of octagonal shingles and diamond-shaped shingles hung in four courses up to the level of the window sills. The widest expanse of wall is covered with horizontal weatherboards (4-1/2" exposure) topped by a 5" flushboard. Above this is a frieze panel, consisting of two courses of decorative shingles. The gable ends of the roofs are sided with octagonal and diamond shingles, and the attic-level walls are sided with shingles above four rows of weatherboards. All siding, trim, window and door frames are painted white.
4. Structural system: Lightweight wood framing, using milled pine lumber. (Studs: 2x4s, 24" on center; first floor joists: 2x8s, 16" on center, supported in two locations by 2x8 beams which rest upon stone piers; ceiling joists: 2x8s, 16" on center; rafters: 2x4s, 16" on center.)
5. Porches: A 12'9" x 5'7" recess in the center of the front (west) wall forms a porch at the front entrance. Framing it on both sides are tapered, turned wood columns. Leading up to the porch are three concrete steps arranged in concentric semi-circles. Centered on the rear (east) wall is an open porch, which has concrete steps, with wood floorboards, turned columns, and a low wall covered with shingles. Beyond this, to the northeast of the house, is a concrete pad situated over the cistern, which has a crank pump.
6. Chimneys: Three massive brick chimneys are located on the slopes of the main roof of the house. They have a number of corbeled courses, and each chimney has two flues, serving paired fireplaces below. Two smaller, square chimneys are situated near the inside edges of the two subsidiary gable roofs at the rear of the house. They are brick, without corbeling, covered with a layer of stucco.

7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The front doorway centered on the facade has plain-board casings and a one-light transom. The door has two panels, the upper one of which is glazed and the lower one of which contains a carved design. Both panels are framed by applied moldings that cross at the corners and have carved chamfers. The two doors on the rear (east) wall are similar to the front door, but have two vertical panels beneath the glazed portion and applied moldings with bull's-eye corner blocks.
- b. Windows: The windows on the main level of the house are either one-over-one double hung, or inswinging casements, all with plain casings. The west wall contains two paired double hung windows, centered under the subsidiary gables. The south wall has one pair of double hung windows centered in the projecting bay, and the north wall has one double hung window which is abutted on either side by a casement window. All of these, as well as a number of single double hung windows are framed at the head by a continuous flush-board and at the base by a continuous sill. Small, square, fixed-sash windows, framed by molded casings with bull's-eye corner blocks, are centered under the six subsidiary gable ends. In the upper level of the center hall on both its east and west ends are nine-over-one double hung windows, the small lights in the upper sash being colored glass.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The house is covered by a roof composed of a large hipped transverse gable and has a subsidiary gable roof at each corner, with a ridge-line parallel to the main ridge and outer slopes lying in the same plane. Cross gables occur over the slightly projecting bays on both of the side elevations. Low-pitched roofs cover the spaces between the subsidiary gables and the main body of the house. All roof surfaces are covered with asphalt shingles and asphalt sheet roofing is used on the pitched areas between the subsidiary gables. Small pent roofs with decorative wood shingles, are situated within the gable ends of the six subsidiary gables.
- b. Cornices: Both horizontal and raking cornices have 1' soffits, and bedmoldings consisting of cyma recta and cavetto profiles.
- c. Dormers: None.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The "public" rooms of the house--center hall, vestibule, dining room, parlor and smoking room--form a cruciform shape, and the "private" rooms--bedrooms, kitchen and library--are located at the corners. The front entrance leads into a small vestibule, which in turn opens onto the large center hall which forms the core of the house. This center hall is truly a grand space--for a small house--12' wide, 26' long, 18' high, in the midst of a cluster of more-or-less square rooms with 10' ceilings. To the north and south of the center hall at the front of the house at the northwest and southwest corners are two bedrooms, each of which has a small closet that backs up to the entry vestibule. The two rooms opening off the center hall through double pocket doors are the dining room on the left (north) and the parlor on the right (south). Beyond the center hall behind a double chimney, is a smoking room (used principally as a bedroom), flanked on the left (north) by the kitchen and on the right (south) by the library. A small pantry is located between the kitchen and the dining room, as is a narrow passage, which allows food to be brought into the dining room without having to enter the center hall. A bathroom is located between the library and parlor, also connected by a narrow passage.
2. Stairways: None.
3. Flooring: The floors consist of 3-1/4" pine tongue-and-groove boards which are either stained or painted (in some cases only on the perimeter around sheets of linoleum). Vinyl-asbestos tile covers the bathroom floor.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The interior walls of the house are generally plaster applied over sawn white pine lath and covered with patterned wallpaper. Ceilings, like the walls, are plaster covered with paper.
5. Doorways and doors: Two types of interior doors are found in the house. Paired pocket doors are used between the center hall and the dining room and parlor on either side. Single-leaf doors with or without a single-light transom are located throughout the rest of the house. All interior doors and transoms have molded casings with molded plinth blocks and bull's-eye blocks in the upper corners. All of the doors are molded four-panel doors made of pine.
6. Decorative features and trim: 7-1/2" molded pine baseboards with quarter-round shoes and molded corner blocks line all the walls

7. Mechanical systems: The house originally had three double fireplaces, paired back-to-back. Of these, one has had both sides blocked off, one has had one side blocked off, and only one, between the center hall and the smoking room, remains as it was originally. The original mantels remain on the three functional fireplaces. The mantel over the fireplace in the smoking room appears to be of an earlier vintage than the house, with plain shelf and pilasters, ovolo molding, atypical staining, and cut nails (all of the nails throughout the house are wire). It may have been salvaged from another earlier structure. The other mantels are Colonial Revival (Adamesque) in design, with applied ornamentation, beveled glass mirrors, fluted Ionic colonnettes, and ceramic tiles on the hearths and around the fireboxes.

The house is served by electricity, gas, water and sewer systems. The bathroom has a full complement of fixtures, and gas heaters are located in two of the rooms.

D. Description of Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The Merritt Violette House is located at the northern edge of the small town of Florida, Missouri, near State Route 107, overlooking the bottom land farmed by the Violette family. This broad area of lowland, recently cleared of its trees, lies on an inside bend of the Salt River, which is joined a quarter of a mile to the northeast by the North Fork. The house faces west within a lawn bounded on three sides by a hedgerow. An immense white oak tree shades the house on the west side, and smaller oaks provide shade for the lawn. Just beyond an Indian mound to the south of the house is the Pollard Cemetery, the burying place of an early family of the area.
2. Outbuildings: Few outbuildings from the original farm remain. The cellar with an attached shed to the northeast of the house is still extant. To the north of that, beyond a fence, was a privy. Further to the north was a garden and several servants' quarters. On a terrace below the house to the east was the carriage house and stable area. On the same terrace to the south of the stables was a barn.

Prepared by: Clayton B. Fraser
Project Supervisor
Historic American
Buildings Survey
September 1978

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in cooperation with the St. Louis District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in compliance with Executive Order 11593, as a part of mitigation efforts connected with the construction of the Clarence Cannon Dam and Reservoir. HABS was engaged to document structures of cultural, historical, or architectural significance located within the Cannon Reservoir Project Area, in portions of Monroe and Ralls County, Missouri. The project was completed under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, and Kenneth L. Anderson, Principal Architect. Recording was carried out during the summer of 1978 by Clayton B. Fraser, Project Supervisor; William T. Morgan (University of South Florida) and Travis C. McDonald (University of Virginia), Architectural Historians; Barbara A. Hendricks (University of Texas), Project Foreman; and Student Architects Dwight H. Burns (Texas Tech University), W. Michael Coppa (University of Virginia), Stephen H. Lauf (Temple University), and Michael K. Murdock (University of Texas). The data was edited in July 1979 by J.A. Chewning, Architectural Historian in the HABS Washington office. Photographs were taken by David J. Kaminsky in August 1978 and by William C. Haines between February and May 1979.